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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KIRKUK 000106

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BAGHDAD FOR POL, NCT, USAID, ROL COORDINATOR, IRMO

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SUBJECT: KIRKUK NGO PROMOTES WOMEN'S RIGHTS, CITY PROJECTS

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CLASSIFIED BY: Scott Dean, Regional Coordinator (Acting), Reo
Kirkuk, Department of State .

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. On April 18, Fathal Uthman Rasul, founder and director of the Rozh Foundation for Women's Rights, discussed the organization's work with IPAO. The Rozh Foundation is an NGO in Kirkuk that promotes women's liberties, civil society projects and educational opportunities. The Director said he and his associates strategically chose to establish Rozh in Kirkuk because of the city's diversity. He said religious ideology and archaic social traditions were the main obstacles to improving both human and women's rights in Iraq. The director complained that certain American and Iraqi NGOs got the lion's share of the funding, and one of them had turned down Rozh's proposal to share in the funding through an implementing partnership. END SUMMARY.

Kirkuk's Favorable Conditions

¶2. (SBU) Rasul said he and his associates strategically chose to establish Rozh in Kirkuk because of the city's diversity. He claimed that women in Kirkuk played a large intermediary role in settling ethnic differences, as witnessed by Kirkuk's vast number of interethnic marriages. The Rozh Foundation's more than 20,000 members represented all of Kirkuk's major ethnicities. Rasul added that he wanted to increase his staff's skills so that Rozh could expand its influence beyond Kirkuk province.

Religion, Social Conditions Thwart Women's Rights

¶3. (SBU) Rasul asserted that women had more rights now than under Saddam, yet women's rights were still not up to an internationally acceptable standard. He said religious ideology was the top obstacle to both human and women's rights in Iraq. Other factors that distracted progress on women's rights in Kirkuk included ethnic and sectarian tensions, internal displacement, and archaic social traditions.

¶4. (SBU) Rasul said overcoming Iraqi social customs was a substantial challenge. For example, according to Iraqi social norms, a woman is not allowed to greet a man inside a home. Rasul affirmed that such traditions had to go, but contended that when the MNF-I mistreated or disrespected the Iraqi people, such actions encouraged Iraqis to retain their traditions.

An Apolitical Iraqi NGO

15. (SBU) Rasul said the Rozh Foundation was not affiliated with any political party because it wanted to maintain its independence. He noted that Rozh, however, accepted funding from political parties, as long as the donation was unconditional. Rasul said some PUK and KDP officials individually donated to the Rozh Foundation. Other substantial donors include the International Republican Institute, National Democratic Institute, Iraqi Civil Society Program, and USAID. Rasul said the Rozh Foundation submitted a proposal to open an independent printing press in Kirkuk, and was coordinating their efforts with the MNF-I head of media affairs. He complained that certain other Iraqi and American NGOs (not specified) got more than their share of the available funding and that a Rozh proposal to assist in implementing a civil society project was turned down by an American NGO.

16. (C) According to Rasul, most women's NGOs were closely tied to political parties, and as a result, those NGOs had a greater loyalty to their party sponsor than women's rights. He argued that institutionalizing apolitical NGOs was Kirkuk's third greatest challenge after improving security and curbing public corruption. Rasul reported that some (unspecified) political parties were working against the Rozh Foundation because of Rozh's growing success working with all parties. (COMMENT: Rasul said he did not feel comfortable sharing which parties were trying to undermine his NGO. END COMMENT.)

Rozh's Successes

17. (SBU) Rasul boasted about some of the Rozh Foundation's successes. Rozh's computer education center presented regular computer training courses, turning out graduates with basic computer skills every 15 days. Rozh's education inspectors coordinated with Kirkuk's general education department (is this a city or provincial office?) to ensure academic, technical, and

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materials standards were met. Rasul noted that the Iraqi Minister of Education sent the Rozh Foundation an appreciation letter for its computer courses and the technical equipment it had provided to schools in Kirkuk. The Rozh kindergarten taught children in Arabic, Kurdish, English, or French as a primary language.

18. (SBU) Rozh's health committee worked to improve Kirkuk's health care facilities, as well as to reach out to other countries to attract foreign health expertise and technology to Kirkuk. For example, Rozh was cooperating with the Italian Government to send 250 children with leukemia to Italy to undergo testing. In addition, Rozh sponsored four clinics, each with eight doctors. Rasul claimed Rozh clinics were the only health centers in Kirkuk that provided physical rehabilitation.

Comment

19. (SBU) Rozh appears to be a large and effective NGO in the Kirkuk province. Our local contacts have reported that Rozh uses the media effectively to advance its programs and messages. Having a male director probably strengthens Rozh's core message of improving women's rights in Iraq's male-dominated society.
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